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**Citation for published version:**

Carsten, J 2018, 'House-lives as Ethnography/Biography', *Social Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 103-116.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12485>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/1469-8676.12485](https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12485)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Social Anthropology

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## **House-lives as Ethnography/Biography**

Janet Carsten, University of Edinburgh

### **Abstract**

This essay considers the intersection of biography and ethnography through an anthropology of the house. It focuses on the multiple entanglements between houses, lives lived within them, and the social contexts within which houses are shaped. If ‘good ethnography’ is the outcome, at least in part, of long-term familiarity with the people and places that are its subject, the sense of being in a proper house rests on a comparable feeling of familiarity. Both of these rely on long-term engagement, and are in this sense inherently biographical. To unpack the entanglements of personhood, kinship, temporality and the state that houses illuminate, I begin with my own engagement with Malay houses over several decades before discussing houses as ‘biographical objects’ (Hoskins 1998) and also as persons. I then examine connections and disconnections between houses and biography through a consideration of some less obviously ‘house-like’ houses. Pursuing the analogy between ethnography and houses further, in the final part of the paper I suggest that, if houses provide a productive opening for ethnography, they might also offer a starting point for a particularly anthropological kind of (auto)biography.

**Key words:** Ethnography, Biography, Houses, Objects, Persons

## House-lives as Ethnography/Biography

Catherine Allerton begins her evocative account of the southern Manggarai people of West Flores in Indonesia with a vivid description of the rooms inside houses, how it feels to be in them, and the value with which they are endowed. ‘Liveliness’, she writes, ‘is central to the everyday significance of the house’ (2013: 54). This quality is, first of all, given by the inhabitants who make the house feel lived in. It is what makes people feel at ease in their houses, but it has more fundamental qualities:

Though liveliness is said to make life “feel delicious,” it also has important protective qualities. The sounds of talk, the crying of children, the noise of machete sharpening or a weaving sword banging on a loom - these are all part of what makes a house alive, “lively,” and therefore protective. (2013: 54)

Houses, we understand from this, must be ‘peopled’ in order to feel like proper houses, and it is the sensation of liveliness that renders them into places that seem safe.

This essay probes the intersection of biography and ethnography through an anthropology of the house. My focus, however, is not on houses *per se* but on the multiple entanglements that houses illuminate between the lives and relations that are enacted within them and the historically-inflected social and political contexts in which they are situated. Houses are not only embedded in the biographies of their inhabitants and vice versa, they embody the interconnections between individual trajectories, kinship, and the state. Whether materially present in bricks and mortar or in remote locations, in ruined or destroyed forms or in evanescent memories, they encapsulate traces of lives previously lived, and reveal how these are forged in the shadows of wider structures. A focus on houses as refracting such entanglements enables us to grasp the latter’s simultaneously temporal, spatial, personal, relational, and political nature.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sarah Green as well as an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions which have been incorporated here and elsewhere in this article. I also thank Patrick Joyce for conversations in Edinburgh, and for the inspiration of his work.

I take the house as an instance of ethnographic subject matter that can act as a prism to illuminate the parallel worlds of ethnography and biography. Because, as Allerton's ethnography makes clear, houses require their people in order to feel 'house-like', an examination of the house necessarily intertwines the spatial with the social. Further, I suggest that, because both the experience of being in a proper house and writing good ethnography rely on long-term engagement, and are in this sense inherently biographical, focussing on the house is a way of probing the intersection of biography and ethnography - as is also vividly illustrated by Sophie Day's contribution to this volume. To unpack what this might involve, in what follows I begin with my engagement with Malay houses over several decades before discussing houses as 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998) and also as persons. I then examine some of the connections and disconnections between houses and biography through a consideration of some less domestic, more obviously state-shaped and work-based, houses. Pursuing the parallels between ethnography and houses further, in the final part of this paper I trace some of my own more remote familial houses to suggest that, if houses provide a productive opening for ethnography, they may also offer a starting point for an anthropologically-inflected form of autobiography.

### **Malay Houses**

When I think back over the three decades and more during which I've known the house I lived in during my first fieldwork on the island of Langkawi, Malaysia, the images that come to mind are a kind of patchwork that is temporally and spatially joined but also disjointed. So, I can recall sitting on the top of the ladder to the entrance at the front of the house before sunset watching the neighbours go by, hurrying from their evening baths at the well, calling out to me and others as they passed along the sandy paths leading to different houses and to the mosque. This vantage point allowed a sociable view onto the back porch and kitchen of a neighbouring house a few yards away whose young women and children, some of my closest village friends, would be cooking the evening meal or chatting to each other, occasionally raising their voices to involve me in their banter and jokes. Other vivid images that come to mind are of eating meals on the floor of the back kitchen in the house I lived in, the plates piled high with rice around a central set of accompanying dishes of fish or vegetables. I recall how it feels to sit or lie on a woven mat on the floor of the main living space of house during the overwhelming heat of the day with

other women and children, or the sound of intense drumming of a tropical downpour on the metal roof of the house when the temperature would drop, and there was a palpable sense of relief – partly because nobody expected me to go visiting and so I could enjoy a break from the social rounds of fieldwork. Accompanying these kinds of visceral memories are sounds – voices calling, chickens squawking, the pounding and scraping of the preparatory tasks of cooking – and smells – of smoke from the cooking fire, of betel quids, the residues of mosquito coils, of spices, and coconut oil: the heady but somewhat indefinable mix of scents that is particular to Malay houses. And equally vivid are the textures of woven mats or wooden floors or of thin plastic that might be used to cover floor boards, the feel of a sarong tied tightly around the waist, the soft lumpiness of kapok mattresses that are used for sleeping, the textures of rice meals eaten, as is customary, with the hand.

If I think for longer, I may begin to separate such images into different time periods. The small oil - and larger - kerosene lamps that provided light in the evenings in the first months of my fieldwork but which gradually disappeared as they were replaced by fluorescent strip-lighting powered first by generators run from car batteries, and more recently by mains electricity. The well at the back of the house, partially screened by foliage, which was the main bathing and laundry area for the inhabitants of several houses of one compound, but more recently has been replaced by internal bathrooms within houses, equipped with piped water and a concrete vat for water to be poured from a standing position outside it in the standard Indonesian or Malay style. Putting these kinds of ‘bodily memories’ into words seems cumbersome. It requires separating out elements of a total sensory experience, which compounds touch, sounds, smells, and appearance. But it also requires explanation of how meals are eaten, how women sit or lie on the floor, how bathing is executed in the proper Malay manner. These are things that are obvious to local inhabitants; they do not need to be explained – except to small children. And the process of rendering them as a text tends to make them dull and removes their sensuous immediacy.

The succession of images I have summoned is just a tiny fraction of those that are available to me, and which one might use to convey the intimate ‘liveliness’ of a Malay house. While many clearly originate from the period of my initial fieldwork, these are overlaid and mixed with others that come from later visits. I know this to be

the case because the house I lived in, like most village houses, has been wholly or in part rebuilt several times since the early 1980s. An old kitchen on stilts linked to a similarly raised back part of the house, was knocked down decades ago and replaced by a concrete-floored structure at ground level; a separate bathroom has been added. Such structural changes are part of the life of a Malay house, and they often accompany marriage or other status changes to its inhabitants (see Carsten 1995a; 1997). And so they have their own temporality that is also biographical. Because the memories I have of the house I lived in are most intense and powerful from the period of my initial and longest stay in the early 1980s, it is this house that tends to come to mind. When I go back to the village on (increasingly rare and brief) social visits, I am struck anew by changes that have in fact been in place for some years, and that I have seen before. The house I visit sits awkwardly with the one I remember most vividly. And although in some respects this new house is more convenient and ‘modern’ than the one I knew first, it is also one with which I am less familiar, and I feel less comfortable in it. One could objectify this: sitting on a hard concrete floor is less pleasant than on wooden boards; metal roofs and construction at ground level mean that houses are less well ventilated in the heat of the day. But there is also a sense of familiarity that comes from the gradual accretion of the events of everyday life, which is lacking. It seems obvious that my biography has diverged from that of this particular house just as it has from the biographies of its occupants. Perhaps it is the unavoidable immediacy of this divergence that is at the root the discomfort I feel on my revisits (see Lambek 2015 and Introduction to this volume).

Houses are not of course solely the outcome of the interplay of individual lives and of familial intimacies. The forms they take and their content and resources reflect the attentions or neglect of the state and local and broader economic conditions. So, the relative poverty by Malaysian standards of rural housing in Langkawi in the early 1980s was the outcome of government policies, just as the improvements in infrastructure, including running water and mains electricity, reflect the channelling of resources to rural Malays that was central to development policy, particularly that of successive governments under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the 1980s and 1990s. Just as fundamental to the biographical disjunctures of which I’m aware on return visits to Langkawi are those that result from state economic and development policies that turned Langkawi from a quiet backwater in the 1980s to a

major international tourist destination by the early Twenty-first century. These changes have had a huge impact on the infrastructure, land values, employment, demography, and much else in Langkawi. While the village where I worked has retained its structural integrity, the economic context within which it is situated is utterly transformed. It is impossible to imagine that the ‘meanings’ of the house have remained stable through such changes. I return to the importance of the state below.

### **From anthropological ‘Houses’ to biography**

The idea that houses function as moral persons in what Lévi-Strauss called ‘Sociétés a Maison’ (house societies) was an important aspect of their significance in the cases he explored (Lévi-Strauss 1983; 1987). Notably, Lévi-Strauss included Indonesian examples in laying out his typology, and other anthropologists have taken up his suggestions to pursue the analysis of the importance of the house in wider Indonesian cultures (see, for example, Allerton 2013; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Fox 2011; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Howell and Sparkes 2003; Waterson 1990). The notion of the house as a ‘moral person’ (*personne morale*) (1983: 174)<sup>2</sup> underlines what Lévi-Strauss saw as its symbolic unifying capacities, its ability to ‘unite opposing principles’ (such as affinity/consanguinity, alliance/descent, matrilineality/patrilineality, inside/outside, male/female). Houses endure through time both through the replacement and succession of their inhabitants and through the transmission of their names, titles and ritual prerogatives, their ‘material and immaterial wealth’ (1983: 174) in societies that apparently lacked other means of ensuring continuity over time. Here the House, in fetishized form, literalized - in bricks and mortar or bamboo and wood - the abstract idea of society. House societies were a kind of hybrid evolutionary form between those regulated by kinship and those regulated by class, elementary structures of kinship in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, and complex ones. The evolutionary aspects of this argument have been challenged (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), but the idea that the house in all its aspects, social, architectural, and symbolic, had a fundamental significance that went beyond the domestic, has given us a fertile site for investigation in other ways.

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<sup>2</sup> See Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 6-7, 14-15 for an extended discussion of the significance of the Maussian term ‘moral person’ rather than ‘corporate group’ as part of an emphasis on alliance rather than descent and the mixing of material and immaterial wealth in Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the house society.

Returning to the theme of the house, as I have at various points in my career (see, for example, Carsten 2004, Chap. 2), I have been more struck by its imaginative and memory-encasing capacities than when I first began to ‘think through houses’. These qualities, emphasised by Gaston Bachelard (1994 [1964]), are perhaps what makes the house such a productive bridge between the personal or autobiographical and wider sociality. Bachelard writes of the house as a ‘topography of our intimate being’ (1994: xxxvi).

Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed.” Our soul is an abode. And by remembering “houses” and “rooms” we learn to “abide” within ourselves (Bachelard 1994: xxxvii).

It is not coincidental that these phrases form the epigraph to Catherine Allerton’s chapter on ‘Rooms: A place for souls’ in the monograph on which I drew in the opening section of this paper. Her analysis, which underlines the continuity of rooms, and how ‘a biographical approach to a room as a place that is made and changed by different kinds of activity’ (2013: 19), illuminates the temporality of houses. But she also shows how in the Manggarai case, the sleeping room

as a shelter for intimate activities, a symbolic womb, a link with ancestral origins, and a harbor for souls, is a very particular kind of *place* - both material and immaterial, relatively passive and active (Allerton 2013: 19, original italics).

Here rooms have lives of their own as it were – they influence those who live in them as much as the reverse is the case. And so, Allerton suggests, one can construct the ‘cultural biography’ (Kopytoff 1986; Allerton 2013: 19) of a room together with that of its inhabitants.

It might seem strange to have moved directly from Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist understanding of the house, an apparently rather static and symbolically fetishized object, to Bachelard’s poetic vision of the way *we* encase houses as much as *houses* encase us. But Allerton’s ethnography helps us to see the connections between these very different understandings of the house. It brings out three linked points. The first is the temporal flow of houses. This may be a material continuity, but also suffers breaches and discontinuities, and it also has immaterial aspects. Lévi-Strauss emphasised the transmission of names and other forms of immaterial wealth in the particular cases he studied; Bachelard focuses on memories and the imagination. The



second point then is the importance of memory to what houses are - and particularly the memories of houses occupied in childhood. It is partly the power to evoke emotions and memories that renders houses and landscapes 'potent' for the Manggarai (Allerton 2013: 184). The third point is the idea that houses could be analysed as 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998) in the sense that houses have biographies that are inextricably entwined with those of their inhabitants. We might see Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on the moral personhood of the house (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 153-4) as one view of such a biography, while Bachelard helps us grasp the layered qualities of the memories of different houses we occupy through our lives. The house is, as he put it 'our first universe' (1994: 4): 'Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days' so that new houses bring to mind memories of former dwellings (1994: 5).

Patrick Joyce takes up these insights from Bachelard in his autobiographical essay 'The Journey West' (2014). He writes of the imprint of

the first house above all, but also the other subsequent ones as we go through life. These successive houses reverberate one with another, the new shaping the old, and the old shaping the new. In this sense we never really leave our houses, especially the first one. (Joyce 2014: 84)

Joyce is concerned with the 'reverberations' between the house he grew up in, a flat in Paddington, west London, and the houses in the west of Ireland from where his parents came as immigrants to London in the late 1920s and early 30s. In spite of the radical differences between the rural Irish houses and the Paddington flat, 'the reverberations of the ones left behind were strong and clear' (2014: 87) in the London home. They inhered in the centrality of the hearth/kitchen and the flow of talk that emanated from there: 'We lived our life in the kitchen, and the relationship between the kitchen and the other two rooms was as in the Irish house' (2014: 88).

Such reverberations occur too between the different mental images of the Malay house from different time periods that I described earlier. My evocations of these, suggestively, have moved between different tenses without fully settling on past or present. But I am aware of other such visual echoes in my daily life. The large cast-iron kitchen range, for example, that is a decorative but non-functional feature of my kitchen in Edinburgh, constantly brings to mind the (equally non-functional) one it

replicates from my childhood home in London (see Carsten 2004: 32). The desire to preserve the Edinburgh version during a process of major renovation before moving into my current home was an unspoken act of ‘the old shaping the new’. And here too the kitchen is at the heart of life in the house in Edinburgh just as it was in the London home of my childhood. Thinking about the power that early ‘house memories’ continue to exert in later life and the ‘reverberations’ between different houses that one has occupied may seem to switch the focus from the life of houses to the inner life of persons. What Allerton and Joyce both take from Bachelard is the idea that houses make their people as much as people make houses. In this way, we can use houses to investigate persons just as much as using persons to understand houses.

### **State houses**

Lévi-Strauss’s interest in ‘House Societies’ made clear, as I have indicated, the capacity of (fetishized) Houses to encode and reproduce hierarchy. This was partly achieved through elaborate or striking architectural features. The noble houses of Europe as well as certain kinds of houses in Indonesia or Northwest coast America were seen by Lévi-Strauss as prototypes of this kind of society. Other writers have been less taken with the idea of house societies as embodying a particular evolutionary stage but have productively pursued the ways that houses may encode hierarchical and other kinds of social distinctions (Waterson 1990; 1995). English stately homes might furnish obvious examples here. Perhaps just as interesting as this capacity to convey hierarchy, is the simultaneous encoding of memory that houses afford – and the possibility that these processes might work together, each entangled in the other. This suggests that houses are powerful transmitters of hierarchy over time and between generations, and that this transmission can accompany or be enfolded into cherished memories from childhood. One ethnography that illuminates this kind of dual process is Joelle Bahloul’s *Architecture of Memory* in which we see how warm recollections of a Jewish-Muslim house in colonial Algeria, evoked in interviews during the 1980s, overlay and blur the tripartite hierarchical distinctions between Muslims, Jews, and French that mark this particular colonial conjuncture.

Bahloul’s work shows how quite mundane domestic features of houses (stoves, cooking equipment, bedding) can be connected to deep structural features of the wider

polity, and how the latter are laid down in the most intimate contexts. In a different disciplinary and cultural context, Patrick Joyce's *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State from 1800* (2013) uses the house as a lens to analyse the institutions of the British state. Two of his examples are particularly instructive. One is his meticulous historical tracing, from the mid-seventeenth century to the twenty-first, of the Post Office - in its heyday one of the largest, most multi-functional and far-reaching state institutions, which, however, also encompassed a domestic side reaching into and out of every British home. It is the 'density of connectivity' of the British postal network that Joyce remarks upon. In 1883 each post office served an average of eight square miles, and an average of 41 letters and postcards were delivered to each inhabitant. In 1890 the Post Office had 91,002 employees, and there were up to twelve deliveries a day in London in 1908 (Joyce 2013: 66-7). The idea of the 'village Post Office' is still with us as a powerful trope conveying a gathering point for community as well as a distribution node for state assets and services – one might almost say a village House in Lévi-Straussian terms. Thinking of the post office in this way opens it up to an unexpected kind of analysis precisely because it suggests a domestic history alongside its more obvious politico-economic one. It is this domestic reach and embeddedness that accounts for its particular place in British social history – its resonance as a social institution as well as its economic and political importance. This kind of potency of the house is explored equally fruitfully in a second kind of institution in Joyce's history: the school house.

The school houses Joyce (2013, Chapter 7) considers are the emblematic residential institutions of the most venerable British public schools – the houses into which boys were (and still are) divided upon entry. With their own rituals and hierarchies, their regimes of corporal punishment, physical training and hardening, and their emphasis on conformity, these commandeered the loyalty of those who attended them. As Joyce makes clear, they supplanted - or were intended to supplant - domestic ties to young boys' natal houses and particularly to mothers and sisters, to the world of women and domesticity (2013: 290-295). Replicated in other contexts, particularly Oxbridge college (see 2013: 298-303), it was loyalty to these houses that underlay proper manhood, and provided a model for adult masculine worlds – the army, male clubs, or the world of formal politics (parliament, interestingly, also encapsulated the idea of an enlarged 'house'). And of course the Houses of British public schools in

time came to be emulated by many state schools, which sought to reproduce their reputation for academic excellence and access to professional success and powerful social networks.

What these examples show is how, far from curtailing our vision, the idea of the house opens up these institutions to a different kind of analysis - one which deepens our understanding of the state and the reproduction of its constituent parts. It does so precisely through illuminating how the domestic is integral to the way state institutions take root and reproduce themselves. The bedding down of ritual and customs over successive generations, the transmission of a historic sense of how things are done is achieved through such seemingly private matters as the detailed etiquette of eating and drinking as well as through the customary manner of speaking in parliament (which, as Joyce points out, owes much to British public school training). They are part of the processes through which hierarchy is deeply encoded. We can all point to early memories from school or home that evoke this sense. If such memories are tied to early emotional encounters and development, this underlines how strong these structural features are, and how resistant to change. The idea that they are ancient and resilient is in fact central to the emotions and loyalties they inspire.

Of course, as Joyce underlines through a juxtaposition with Galway Gaol (2013: 303-7), it is not just 'houses of success' that are worth considering here. Equally low down the social hierarchy, we might want to think about the workhouse as another 'house institution' that is deeply etched in British social memory. The enforced supplanting of autonomous domestic existence here was central to the horror workhouses inspired. Not surprisingly then, both the apparently positive forms of house institution and its negative versions have a prominent presence in English fictional writing and other forms of cultural memory.

### **Work-houses**

The workhouse as a total institution was intended as an anomaly – an aberration from normal life brought about by poverty and the inability to sustain oneself and one's family. It draws its emotional force at least partly from its juxtaposition to the idea of a 'normal' domestic house – one that is often thought of as separated from the world

of work. This separation, however, as many feminist scholars have pointed out, is part of the ideology of modern capitalist society rather than its reality (see, for example, McKinnon and Cannell 2013). The examination of forms of labour within the household has been central to that insight. But what if, alongside the examination of houses as workplaces, we considered the ‘house life’ of work places? What kinds of analysis or new insights might this make possible?

When I embarked on a study of clinical pathology labs and blood banks in Malaysia, houses were far from my mind - though my interest in the Malay house had no doubt predisposed me to be attentive to the more domestic practices of these workspaces. The way different spaces were used, adapted, cleaned and marked out illuminated for me what these sites meant to the people who worked in them. These were apparently strictly utilitarian sites, dominated by lab benches, sinks, fume cupboards, as well as items of more high-tech equipment: sophisticated blood analysers, centrifuges, computers, fridges and freezers for storing blood products. Following the food, as well as the blood that was my original focus was, it turned out, a good diagnostic of social relations within the workplace. Who ate with whom, what was eaten where, the different media and spaces of sociality as well as the different kinds of occasion that inspired commensality were revealing indicators of sociability. I was struck by an apparent contradiction: how could the consumption of food be so important in workspaces where food was explicitly not permitted? Initial attempts to describe what went on in these spaces and to capture their sociable qualities drew the inevitable comments that what I was depicting held surprising echoes of the Malay houses I had described more than twenty years earlier. And when, gradually and almost imperceptibly, the ghosts that inhabited the margins of these hospital labs came into view, I began to think more carefully about the significance of domesticating such a clinical and highly technologised working environment.

The ghosts about whom medical lab technologists and other workers in the labs and blood banks showed considerable interest and concern – especially once my questioning picked this up - could be considered an expression of the multiple risks of these workspaces. Examining how the labs were made ‘homely’, showed the ways in which workers assimilated the risks of their work and tried to mitigate them. But domestication could potentially generate further risks even as it consolidated ties with

colleagues and transformed the working environment into something less alien and more familiar (see Carsten 2013). Studies of contemporary work practices in factory environments have similarly drawn attention to domesticating and kin-making processes as ways of humanising harsh or unpleasant working conditions, and resisting managerial practices (Dunn 2004; Mollona 2009). They underline the significance of the ‘analogy between “home” and “workplace”’ (Dunn 2004: 150). And this suggests that we might use these ‘house insights’ in a different way to pursue the intersection of biography and ethnography.

### **Houses as (auto)biographical objects**

In his one-man show, *887*, premiered in 2015, the Canadian theatre director and writer Robert Lepage creatively explores family life, memories of childhood, and the politics of 1960s Quebec through the myriad connections the house affords between the domestic world of the family and the politics of the state. The number 887 refers to Lepage’s childhood family home at 887 Avenue Murray, an apartment house where he spent his childhood, and which forms the overarching metaphor for understanding the familial and political times in which he grew up. Here the house, which includes his own family apartment and those of the neighbours, is successively miniaturised and expanded on stage. It provides a set of overlapping windows or scenes encompassing father-son relations, the dementia of Lepage’s grandmother, the childhood cancer of his sister, colonialism, class, and the tumultuous politics of Quebec nationalism – including a bombing campaign by the Front de Libération du Québec and subsequent state repression. The power of this theatrical piece – which rests on its visual and linguistic inventiveness – lies in its capacity to show how the miniature of the apartment enfolds and mirrors the forces of Quebec politics as well as the popular culture of the times. It does so through memories of childhood, which are woven through these reflections in visual images, music, and speech. That such reflection is a product of inevitably eroding adult memory is underlined during the performance by the repeated and arduous attempts of the adult Lepage to recite from memory Michele Lalonde’s 1968 poem ‘Speak White’ – an attack (in French) on the linguistic oppression of Anglophone Canada.

I take *887* to be both ethnographic and biographical, and to show more broadly how the metaphor and reality of the house might provide a way to write a biography that is

personal but also ethnographic. While Lepage may not think of his work in these terms, my interest here is in exploring the more anthropological openings of biography. In the remaining part of this article, I pursue this idea through some of my own house lives.

Where to begin such an undertaking? In *After Kinship* (2004), I used some brief vignettes of rooms in my childhood home in London to trace the interconnections of houses and memory. I noted how the central rooms of this house echoed elements of my parents' past lives and their childhood homes but also departed radically from these. I described there a contrast between a vast and quite formal living and dining room, always referred to as 'the big room', which was generally not used, and the twin hearts of the house – the large kitchen, and my parents' study-bedroom - where most of the actual living took place. These latter spaces were an expression of their more bohemian, intellectual selves, and the break they had made from their pasts. Both the echoes and the innovations could be read through their biographies of continuity and dislocation that the house they made together seemed to encapsulate.

For a more ambitious project one might want to reach further back in time. So, I might begin, perhaps arbitrarily, with the well-to-do bourgeois apartment house in Berlin in the prosperous Tiergarten neighbourhood in which my father, Francis, grew up. Partly because of his emotional estrangement from his parents, this was a home of which he clearly nurtured no fond memories whatsoever. The disconnection from his conservative family was also political, linked to Francis's leftist political engagement that was the immediate cause of his hasty departure from Germany in 1936. The apartment building where he spent his childhood and youth in Berlin no longer exists, having apparently been bombed in the war, but the (currently vacant) site is traceable. Nearby is the Bauhaus museum and archives – a fact that I suspect would have pleased Francis as he retained a strong attachment to radical German artistic culture of the Weimar republic and later. Next door to this is the beautifully restored and rather graceful neo-classical nineteenth-century Villa von der Heydt from which the street takes its name. One of the few villas of its kind to survive the destruction of the Tiergarten district wrought by Albert Speer's remodelling of central Berlin to form 'Welthauptstadt Germania' – World Capital Germania - this was salvaged from dilapidation in the 1970s, and is now beautifully made over as the residence of the

Foundation for Prussian Culture (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz).<sup>3</sup> On first view from the outside, the Villa von der Heydt, which I have not entered, brought immediately to my mind Francis's rather fond descriptions of his maternal grandmother's house – a villa with beautiful garden, situated around the corner in Tiergarten Strasse, to which he was a frequent visitor.

Proceeding along von der Heydt Strasse, and eventually turning east into Tiergarten Strasse, the former site of my great grandparental house is actually quite difficult to locate. This house too did not survive the war – and I think was destroyed before the allied bombing campaigns as part of Albert Speer's depredations. The site at number six is apparently now occupied by the Decorative Arts Museum (Kunstgewerbe Museum, which is, however, accessed not from Tiergarten Strasse but from the other side, on Matthäikirchplatz), and is part of a rather grandiose collection of prominent cultural buildings close to the Herbert von Karajan Concert Hall. The locations of buildings and house numbers indicate that these house lots were large and well separated. Continuing on Tiergarten Strasse to the east from the art museum and concert hall, when I visited in summer 2013 and early 2014, the next numbered house site was marked by a set of boards to commemorate the house that no longer exists at number four. Like other such boards that have been put up at various locations in Berlin, they tell the story of the house that was there before the war, and what happened to its occupants. Reading this, I learned that the house was seized by the Nazis from a Jewish family, the Liebermann's, and from spring 1940, was the headquarters of the notorious T4 (codenamed from Tiergarten Strasse no. 4). This was the Chancellery department with responsibility for the forced sterilisation and 'euthanasia' of those deemed 'incurably sick', including psychiatric patients and

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<sup>3</sup>The extraordinary and varied history of this building, which can be read as a material and social reflection of the times, is worth an essay in itself. Originally built in 1862 by banker, and later minister in Bismarck's government, August Freiherr von der Heydt, it apparently passed within seventy years from family villa, to shady outpost of the Chinese embassy (in which guise it was guest house and opium den), to 'glittering salon', to exclusive 'sports [gambling] club'. Subsequently bombed and partially destroyed during the war, the cellar was afterwards used as a post-war sweets factory and illegal distillery. See [http://www.berlin-hidden-places.de/yuba\\_web3/regional\\_en/tier/tier\\_heydt\\_en.htm](http://www.berlin-hidden-places.de/yuba_web3/regional_en/tier/tier_heydt_en.htm) and <http://www.visitberlin.de/en/spot/villa-von-der-heydt>



people with other disabilities. An estimated 70, 000 people were killed in the designated centres of this programme in Germany, and more than 300,00 are estimated to have been killed as a result of the Aktion T4 programme across Europe. The personnel and technology developed for this programme were also used in the mass killings in mobile death vans and in the gas chambers of the concentration camps. In late 2014, a new and more prominent memorial to the victims of T4 killings was opened on this site.

A short walk in Berlin to glimpse two former house sites encompasses quite a lot of history. Francis's reluctance to accompany me on a visit to Berlin in the 1990s (recalling Charles Stafford's account in this volume of paternal reticence about research with biographical resonance) begins to acquire some context – although he himself had been a frequent visitor to Germany in the decades after the war. Without (or before?) delving into the archival records, my house biography/ethnography in Berlin is paused. Meanwhile, on the maternal side, the childhood home was much less prominent, the house itself less distinguished. A brief trip to the small, pretty south German town where my mother, Ruth, grew up, made with her in 1967 when I was a child, is dominated in my mind not by a house, which I don't recall seeing, but by the cemetery where we went to visit the graves of her father and brother. Patrick Joyce's (2014) couplings in 'The Journey West' of the house, the road, and the grave come to mind. But here one might want to substitute railways, as the main means of long distance transport across Europe in the first part of the Twentieth century, for roads.

Prompted by Patrick Joyce's (2013) history of the British state, I switch from domestic to school house here. After she left Germany and came to England in 1936 as a refugee, Ruth taught in a succession of schools – the first being Downe House, an independent boarding school for girls founded in 1907, which originally occupied Charles Darwin's house in Downe, Kent, and then moved to Berkshire, and the second the Perse School in Cambridge, a boys' public school established in 1615. The latter is a public school institution with Houses of the kind Joyce discusses, and indeed perhaps a bit of a prototype. His observations on the importance of supplanting domestic ties to the world of women recall for me Ruth's amused stories of teaching there during the war when male teachers were hard to come by. The boys were

nevertheless instructed by the Headmaster to call her ‘Sir’, and did so with considerable enthusiasm even - or especially - on chance meetings about town.

After her marriage in 1945 and the birth of her children, Ruth, unusually for the times, continued to teach full-time. This was in London, and not in schools but ‘crammers’ – tutorial establishments, which specialised in small group or individual teaching in preparation for ‘A’ levels and Oxbridge entrance exams, and which paid staff at hourly rates without benefits or holidays. These too had a house aspect – though of a different kind from their men’s public school counterparts (of which they might be seen as off-shoots). The writer Penelope Fitzgerald, who taught at Westminster Tutors in the 1960s and 70s, as did Ruth in the 1970s, refers to it in her letters in domestic register as ‘Miss Freeston’s’ – by the name of its founder and Head until 1976. Housed at the time in flats in Artillery Row in Victoria, Hermione Lee, Fitzgerald’s biographer, describes how

There was a bohemian, shabby air to the place. Miss Freeston’s aura hung over the premises; literally so, since she was inseparable from her very old dog, Topsy, “dirty, blind and smelly beyond words”

- as Fitzgerald herself wrote in a letter to her daughter Maria in 1972. The novelist A.S. Byatt, a colleague of Fitzgerald’s in the 1960s, similarly, ‘remembered a terrific smell of “rich upholstery and decaying dogs”’. Lee notes how Miss Freeston ran the school ‘on a haphazard system. She often did not pay the staff their wages, but she had a sharp eye for a promising teacher’ (Lee 2013: 193-194).

There is another history to be pursued here of education, careers for women, the ‘houses’ - or flats, rooms, and cubicles in made-over buildings - where they taught, their limited facilities for staff, and the sociality between colleagues that they enabled - and also constrained. Eventually, we might put this more hidden gendered story and its houses side by side with Joyce’s history of prominent educational men’s houses.

### **House-lives**

I have sketched just the small beginnings here of what might grow into a composite and nested series of house histories as autobiography. It could be developed through a more thorough excavation of some of the houses I have mentioned to explore their sites and their rooms, and the wider histories of continuity and disruption they

embody. As well as the connections between houses and their inhabitants that such 'house-lives' might illuminate, we could begin to see how houses are enfolded into each other, carrying traces and echoes of their predecessors – what Patrick Joyce, drawing on Bachelard, calls 'reverberations'. The house in north London in which I grew up carried such traces in its rooms and in its garden where, as Francis sometimes remarked, he grew camellias that reminded him of those in his grandmother's garden in Berlin. And these echoes reverberate further into my own house with its kitchen in Edinburgh, and in the garden there where we have also planted camellias.

Such vestiges are embedded in the imaginations and personal biographies of the inhabitants who carry them, sometimes unconsciously, from one site to another. 'In this sense, we never really leave our houses, especially the first one' (Joyce 2014: 84). The way domestic houses may implicitly insinuate themselves and their practices into work spaces – even those which on the face of it seem quite 'unhomely' such as the labs and blood banks that I studied in Malaysia - suggests that the ethnography of work might gain from a greater attentiveness to the intersections of home and workplace biographies. For a more ambitious work on house-lives, one might include some further houses with their innovations and subsequent traces: the village house in Malaysia, the flat in Athens in which I lived in the 1980s. Thinking about the productive lens of the school house and the wider history to which it gestures, one might include too some less homely habitations, including the disused mill near Manchester where Francis was briefly interned during the war, and about which he spoke vividly in an interview recorded in the 1970s.

This begins to look like a research project – one that would encompass history, biography, and ethnography to illuminate not just how houses over the long-term enfold each other, and how even abandoned and destroyed houses have their material and imaginary 'afterlife', but also the deep interconnections running between family life, work life, and the political life of the state. Taking inspiration from the Malay and Indonesian world, and the anthropology of the house there, it would show too how houses apparently take on the capacity to act on those who live in them, even as they are made and erased by their inhabitants and by those who have power over their continuity or destruction. Between ethnography and biography - for the moment, this project is on hold.

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